
INTERVIEW: DON'T LET AFGHANISTAN BECOME FORGOTTEN CRISIS - RED CROSS OFFICIAL

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- The world must not let Afghanistan become a forgotten crisis, a senior Red Cross official said on Friday as he warned of spiralling violence, donor fatigue and a worrying "brain drain" of educated professionals.

"The international community must keep their attention on Afghanistan. It's far from being over. It's not the time to switch off," said Jean-Nicolas Marti, outgoing head of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) in Afghanistan.

He warned that violence - which is at levels not seen since 2001 - would likely escalate in the coming year.

"The security situation has really deteriorated ... and my prediction is a further deterioration," Marti said. "Potentially the 18 months ahead of us will be much tougher."

Marti is meeting government officials in European capitals and Washington to press for greater political, financial and humanitarian support.

"The message is (we need) to make sure that Afghanistan doesn't become a forgotten or ignored conflict," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation in London.

Marti was speaking just days after a suicide attack in Kabul killed 64 people and injured hundreds more in the deadliest single incident of its kind in the capital since 2011.

The Taliban, which claimed responsibility, is believed to be stronger than at any point since it was

ousted by U.S.-backed forces in 2001. Fighters loyal to Islamic State have also emerged in pockets of the country.

Marti said the ICRC had evacuated 600 war-wounded in the first three months of the year – a high number given that fighting usually tails off in winter when mountain passes are snowed in.

"It ... demonstrates that the fighting season is going to be tough this year and the humanitarian response needs to be up to it," he said.

The Taliban, which wants to drive Afghanistan's Western-backed government from power, announced the start of their spring offensive on April 12.

The ICRC said it was particularly alarmed by the rising number of civilian casualties which hit a record high for the seventh successive year in 2015, with over 11,000 non-combatants killed or injured.

Attacks against medical facilities and staff have also risen 50 percent in the last year, making it more difficult for civilians to access healthcare.

Marti said the ICRC was launching a flying surgical team which will tour hospitals in provincial capitals around Afghanistan, training medical staff to respond to emergencies.

An estimated one million people are displaced within Afghanistan and others have fled abroad. Afghans are the second largest group of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe behind Syrians.

Marti warned of a "brain drain" as middle class professionals pack their bags in an exodus which could have serious implications for the country.

"What makes me pretty worried about the future of this country is that I know Afghans ... who were here 10 years ago hoping to create a future for Afghanistan and who are now picking up their belongings and fleeing to Europe or to Canada.

"(This) illustrates for me that they are losing hope for the future of this country."

Afghanistan is suffering from donor fatigue, partly because international attention was focused on Syria and Iraq, he said.

"We've seen a decrease in general interest for Afghanistan, but the situation is actually getting worse. It's dangerous.

Kaynak/Source: